

## ACT ONE

As the play begins, a SPOTLIGHT rises on a MUSIC BOX on a table, roughly center stage. As if by magic, the MUSIC BOX begins to emit A BEAUTIFUL, TINGLY TUNE. The TUNE plays and plays and plays... until we notice a young woman approach the MUSIC BOX, as if drawn by its music. HER name is BELLA PLUMMER - about 16. SHE is dressed simply, indicating some degree of comfortable poverty. Despite this, BELLA shines with a sunny disposition that is entirely at odds with the reality of HER financial modesty. For a moment, BELLA considers the MUSIC BOX fondly and then silences the TUNE.

BELLA

(To us.)

Earlier in my life, when I was as young as you see me now, I learned many things, as someone of that age is wont to do, not only about the physical world around me, but about life, about faith, and about hope. Now, I say "faith" and "hope" - and in what else, but each other, and perhaps something even more besides that speaks to us in some special way and directs us back home when we are in danger of being lost. This story represents my first understanding of all this - and like so many stories, it begins out of nothing other than my memory - which, while not recollecting every little phrase, remembers the feeling and heart behind them all - and in that, is as accurate a representation as anything could ever be.

BELLA winds up the MUSIC BOX again and it repeats ITS TINGLY TUNE. By now, the LIGHTS have brightened to reveal a set full of brightly colored toys, almost as if we have been transported to a nursery in paradise. ACTORS and ACTRESSES materialize out of the darkness surrounding BELLA bearing various furniture pieces - a chair, a table, a small this, a small that. THEY place these objects here and there as the MUSIC plays.

Before too long, the house of John and Dot Plekkenpoel has been created before our eyes. There is a kitchen off to one

side, dominated by large windows - or some objects representing the same - and a cozy living area off to the other, with a few comfy chairs and a hearth. The hearth is especially prominent and complemented by a roaring fire. Three doors lead offstage - one to John and Dot's bedroom, one to a spare room for guests, and one being the front door of the house.

As the scene is finalized before our eyes, we hear A CRICKET CHIRP from the darkness - which could be a literal chirp or perhaps even represented by a gentle twiddle on a violin. It sounds not unlike the chime from some unseen cuckoo clock. Hearing this, the ACTORS disperse, as if midnight has struck and THEY fear being turned into pumpkins. With that, THEY glide off and are absorbed into the darkness.

At this moment, we notice one of the ACTORS has not left the stage - namely, DOT PLEKKENPOEL. SHE is a perky, petite, and very young little thing, carrying a clothed bundle in HER arms, which we soon recognize as a BABY. DOT has been bustling about, returning regularly to the windows of the Plekkenpoel house that faces the outside world and waiting for something (or someone) to arrive.

Now that DOT is alone, the BABY emits a slight cry, prompting DOT to "hush" HIM gently and rock HIM back and forth. DOT smiles and slowly places the BABY in a nearby wooden rocker (successfully, as no further crying results). SHE takes in the moment and examines the BABY lovingly.

DOT

(To HERSELF.)

Oh, John... what a handsome son we have.

Just then, A LOUD GUST OF WIND sounds from outside, indicating a rather nasty snowstorm. DOT hurries over to the kitchen windows and looks out eagerly in anticipation of... something. The BABY starts to cry again with all the

noise of the storm. DOT rushes over to the BABY, picking up a small stuffed animal on the way and handing it to HIM, which calms HIM down.

DOT

There, there... Papa will be back soon.

DOT glances anxiously off to the windows in such a way that indicates SHE may not be so sure about that last statement. SHE busily heads over to the stove in the house, lights it with a match from a nearby lantern, and puts a large iron kettle on it. BELLA, who has remained onstage and who has been watching throughout, turns again to us.

BELLA

It has been so many years since I saw them last, John and Dot Plekkenpoel - with I but sixteen or so. Still, I remember them as if it were yesterday - or perhaps the day before. This is their house... their baby... their story.

As if on cue, DOT suddenly glances up through the windows and, seeing someone in the distance, a large smile lights on HER face. SHE races to the front door of the house, opens it, and waves enthusiastically to a figure just beyond. The LOUD SWISH OF THE SNOWSTORM thunders into the cozy surroundings.

DOT

John! John!

The LOUD PITCH OF A KETTLE BOILING distracts DOT and prompts HER to run back to the stove to take off the kettle. As SHE does so, a large, hulking man in HIS 40's enters through the door - JOHN PLEKKENPOEL. For a moment, it is hard to tell whether HIS largeness is a result of the enormous winter clothes HE wears or whether it's HIS general build, but we soon discover it's the latter. HE carries with HIM a large sack stretched to the limit with bulky, angular objects, which we shall soon know as packages and letters. JOHN deposits the sack on the floor with a loud, bear-like growl.

DOT

Goodness, John - look at the state you're in!

DOT brushes snow off JOHN's shoulders and helps HIM take off HIS all-enveloping jacket. As we spy THEM both together, THEY seem an odd pair. DOT is so young and small, simply but brightly colored, sprightly in action and sing-songy in voice. JOHN is an older, simple man in comparison, who is gentle in nature, but ragged in appearance and lumbering in action. Indeed, HE talks very little - and now especially so - barely grunting in response to DOT, so much is HE suffering from the bitter cold.

DOT

Why, it would seem even the cold has frozen your mouth shut.

JOHN

Oh, it works, but it is too busy cursing the weather to be heard.

DOT

Which is why John Plekkenpoel should come home earlier to his charming young wife and his handsome young son, else he could freeze in the middle of delivering a package and be mistaken for a statue.

JOHN

Ah, well, people do need their packages - especially this time of year.

DOT

Aye, and I need my husband, preferably thawed, also at this time of year.

JOHN glances over at the BABY - now finally asleep

JOHN

Look at him - asleep the whole time!

DOT

(Almost indignant, but also amused.)  
Not the whole time, John. He only sleeps when you're here, otherwise he makes sure he and I are well awake. In that, you seem to cast a bit of a spell. If only you were around more often, I would get a great deal more rest.

JOHN

Aye, he's always calm when I see him.

DOT

I do believe he's angling for a brother.

JOHN

(Staring hungrily at the stove and patting HIS stomach.)  
And do you know what I'm angling for, Dot?

DOT

(Cheekily.)  
A quieter wife, John?

JOHN

Oh, Dot...

DOT

Now, John, you silly thing - you really are too serious, even for your age. You know I'm joking, though I do talk a good deal, enough for the two of us - but all is well in that. If I didn't talk as much as I do, we'd fast turn into some old couple who pass each other all day long without a word being spoken, save for a grunt and a nod now and then - and I won't have it. You stop being serious or, really, I shall have to go to a shop in town and buy you a new sense of humor. Now you sit back and let me make you well.

DOT gently pushes JOHN into a chair at the kitchen table. HE falls into it like an old sack of potatoes. Reflexively, DOT goes to a nearby table and prepares a pipe for JOHN. SHE approaches HIM, just as JOHN is about to speak - but pop! Before HE knows it, into HIS mouth goes the pipe.

JOHN

(Amused - this is exactly what HE wanted.)  
I didn't ask for my pipe.

DOT

You don't have to.

DOT smiles and goes to the stove. SHE removes a large pie from the oven and cuts a piece, as JOHN watches HER lovingly. Quick as a flash - SHE is very efficient - DOT plops a plate of pie and a drink in front of JOHN. (SHE is so fast, we're not even sure where the drink came from.)

JOHN

It smells good, Mrs. Plekkenpoel.

DOT

That's because it is good, Mr. Plekkenpoel.

JOHN begins to eat, as DOT meanders over to the large sack of packages and letters. SHE peers into the sack with amusement.

DOT

My, there are a lot of letters.

JOHN

Aye, it is good that business is picking up.

DOT

As someone who is quite fond of gossip, I don't know how you could deliver so many letters and yet not have the urge to read a single one of them.

DOT picks up a heart-shaped, terribly pinkish, tin container. SHE reads a tag on the package and looks at JOHN quizzically.

DOT

"Tackleton?"

JOHN

(Explaining.)  
He's getting married.

DOT

He's getting married?!

JOHN

On Friday, to someone he loves, he says, "most dearly."

DOT

Well, that is quite a feat, then - marrying himself.

JOHN

You know well who it is.

DOT

Aye, I do, at that - and it's the first time that the victim is known before the crime is committed. I don't know quite how May will stomach Mr. Tackleton, any more than she will stomach this ghastly box.

JOHN

It's a wedding cake.

DOT

Oh, I thought it was his actual heart. It's hard enough.

JOHN

Oh, Dot...

DOT

"Oh, John" - you know it's true as well as I.

JOHN

Granted, it is rather hard to warm up to him.

DOT

Aye, like a fire that's gone out - and besides, he's over twice her age.

JOHN

Oh, well, if that were a crime, there might also be a jail cell for me in it.

DOT

Look, John Plekkenpoel, you know full well I wasn't talking about you, but Tackleton only, who wears his age like a monkey wears a suit. It would be nothing, if not for the fact that he acts twice as old as he is - and besides, May is not in a state for this sort of thing. With her parents having died, I can't imagine she has much room for marriage in her mind, save out of necessity - and necessity isn't the strongest foundation for matrimony.

JOHN

Aye, Dot, but it's not our concern...

DOT

Which is precisely why it interests me!

JOHN

Good God!

DOT

Yes, isn't He?

JOHN

I forgot him outside!

DOT

God?

JOHN

No - man!

DOT

What man?

JOHN rushes through the front door. DOT peers after HIM through the windows.

DOT

Goodness, John - the things you pick up!

JOHN enters, assisting an old, limping, nondescript MAN. HE is covered head to toe in a dark cloak and sports a large, graying beard that overwhelms HIS face and almost makes any human features indistinguishable. The MAN is also quite groggy, having just awoken from a deep, deep slumber. JOHN gently helps HIM sit in a chair.

JOHN

(To DOT, explaining.)

He was asleep the whole time out there.

DOT

That's almost an achievement in this weather.

JOHN

(To the MAN.)

I do hope you are well, sir.

The MAN grunts in sleepy reply.

DOT

Exactly who is this, John?

JOHN

He says he is a Mr. Christian.

DOT

Why, that is very faithful of him.

JOHN

I found him on the side of the road as I was traveling along in the carriage. I looked up and there he was, limping along, shaking with the cold and staring off into space. I stopped and asked him if I could give him a ride, bearing the weather in mind and no sign of respite in sight. He couldn't much stay out there without finding a place for warmth.

DOT

This is not an inn, John.

JOHN

Aye, it isn't, but I was famished for food and couldn't much leave him outside.

MISTER CHRISTIAN

(To DOT.)

Blessed be you, ma'am, and your most kind hospitality on this very dreary day.



DOT

Of course, Mr. Christian - and do forgive my surprise, but, as I hope you understand, I am used to my husband coming home with many a package, but very few with legs. You are certainly welcome here until my husband can find you accommodations more suitable to your needs. I have a pie recently cooked and you are more than welcome to partake.

MISTER CHRISTIAN

I would appreciate that, ma'am.

DOT

Then, please, do make yourself at home.

MISTER CHRISTIAN

(To JOHN.)

God bless you, sir - you and your lovely daughter.

JOHN

(A bit piqued.)

She is my wife.

MISTER CHRISTIAN

Oh, I am sorry.

DOT

So is my husband, Mr. Christian, as I rather tend to run circles around him.

(Cheekily, to JOHN.)

Don't I, John?

The SOUND of A CARRIAGE APPROACHING is heard offstage, pulling up to the Plekkenpoel house. DOT looks out the kitchen windows.

DOT

Why, the Devil has come looking for his heart.

MISTER CHRISTIAN

(Eyes raised, to JOHN.)

The Devil?

A moment later, the front door bursts open. An older man enters, about 50, dressed in dull, lifeless finery and with a finicky, twitching energy - ERNEST TACKLETON.

TACKLETON

(Trouncing into the house.)

Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Plekkenpoel.

DOT

(Pointedly.)  
Do please come in, Mr. Tackleton.

TACKLETON

What a terrible night it is.

DOT

(Aside, to MISTER CHRISTIAN.)  
Inside now, as well as out.

JOHN

You look pleased, Mr. Tackleton.

TACKLETON

Ah, well, it's the heart in me, you see - the heart of a man filled with the bright light of love.

DOT

(Aside again, to MISTER CHRISTIAN.)  
Either that or indigestion.

TACKLETON

(To DOT.)  
I suppose you've heard the news, eh?  
(To JOHN.)  
Old Ernest Tackleton is about to be wed!  
(To DOT.)  
That's right - wed!  
(To JOHN.)  
After all these years.  
(To MISTER CHRISTIAN.)  
To May Fielding.  
(A beat - realizing HE hasn't met MISTER CHRISTIAN before.)  
Hello.

DOT

This is Mr. Christian.

TACKLETON

(To MISTER CHRISTIAN, who has no intention of rising.)  
Charming! Don't get up.

DOT

(To MISTER CHRISTIAN.)  
You may have heard of Mr. Tackleton.

TACKLETON

Of "Gruff and Tackleton" fame, no less.

JOHN

The toymakers.

TACKLETON

Granted, there is that - though, in truth, what I sell is peace and quiet. Give a toy to a child and the noisy little beast will shut up sooner or later - rather like man, you see. Give him a toy of some sort and he won't complain any longer about his rights or his wages or his place in life or any other tommyrot. We can all be distracted by a little tinsel in life, eh... which brings me back to marriage...

TACKLETON notices the heart-shaped wedding cake box.

TACKLETON

Ah, the cake!

JOHN

It's a fine-shaped cake, Mr. Tackleton.

TACKLETON

Aye, so it is! A few less ounces with the curves and thus a few pennies lighter as well.

DOT

Oh, Mr. Tackleton - how very economical you are.

TACKLETON

Ah, well, nothing shows love like the saving of a penny.

DOT

(Jokingly.)

In fact, Mr. Tackleton, you might consider eating half the cake now and saving the rest for your first anniversary.

TACKLETON

(Taking HER seriously.)

Ah, Mrs. Plekkenpoel, what a terribly romantic idea - but alas, I wouldn't want May to prejudice her figure so.

DOT

Perish the thought, Mr. Tackleton.

TACKLETON

(Completely overtaken by HIMSELF.)

My dear, dainty, darling little May - how I shall relish those peaceful moments of wedded bliss we'll share together! There she will be, day after day... after day... safe and warm in our comfy little home... knitting me sweaters and sweeping the floor and occasionally chopping the odd log or two... free from the noise of this most torrid world... and then, at night, we shall sit by the fire for hours and hours with our cocoa, staring lovingly at each other and nary saying a word... until, oh, the clock strikes eight and we leap between the sheets and take turns reading from The Book of Job!

TACKLETON (CONT)

(Sighing, shaking HIS head sadly.)

Ah, were May not quite so young - for when I die, I do fear she will be so bored without me!

DOT

Indeed, Mr. Tackleton - and yet, I am sorry.

TACKLETON

Sorry?

DOT

Yes - that you have to go now.

TACKLETON

Do I?

DOT

Well, a man as important as you, I would have thought you always have someplace else to be.

TACKLETON

(Delighted.)

Ah, and so you are correct, Mrs. Plekkenpoel!

(To JOHN.)

Bright woman you have for a wife, Mr. Plekkenpoel!

(To MISTER CHRISTIAN.)

Then again, wives usually are... women, that is.

(To JOHN.)

For brightness such as hers, that's why you marry 'em young, when the brain is still fresh - which reminds me...

(Sotto voce.)

May we talk?

JOHN

We are now.

TACKLETON

I mean, eh...

TACKLETON gestures vaguely - "in private." JOHN wearily walks with TACKLETON to the side of the stage. DOT watches suspiciously and, in the background, serves a piece of pie to MISTER CHRISTIAN, who remains silent.

TACKLETON

It seems all is well in your household, Plekkenpoel.

JOHN

It is, at that, with the baby quite well and work picking up.

TACKLETON

Ah, I was talking about everything between you and the wife - quite solid, eh? How old is she now?

JOHN

Why, but 22, shy of a day.

TACKLETON

Ah, so quite like my May.

JOHN

Yes - thereabouts.

TACKLETON

I only mention it, you see, because of May, my dearly betrothed. She is a scared little thing, I can tell. It's my natural perception. Someone steps on a shred of grass and my heart breaks, so in tune am I to the world around me - and as for May, well... I can tell she is having herself a good think or two. We are, after all, apart in age by, oh, a year or two... or ten... or twenty... and naturally, a young wisp of a thing with her head in the clouds would find it hard to understand the mind of such a well-grounded gentleman as I... but then you managed it, didn't you - you and Mrs. Plekkenpoel?

JOHN

(Uncomfortably.)

I don't entirely see the comparison.

TACKLETON

Well, if you had my natural perception, you might - but you don't, so you don't... have it. I do and I tell you we're one in the same, you and I, John Plekkenpoel. We all want the same thing as any other man - money and happiness... and money. My toys have brought the one and now May Fielding will bring the other, just like you married your Dot. Just need to get her in the right mind, you see. Get her in that and she'll be skipping her way to the altar - and by God, probably even get there a day early. A little perspective will show May that marrying me is the best thing that could ever happen to her.

By now, JOHN isn't paying attention to TACKLETON, but is rather looking over at DOT and MISTER CHRISTIAN. During the above, THEY have been conversing together rather intimately, with DOT sitting quite close to HIM. JOHN finds this odd. TACKLETON follows HIS gaze and looks over at DOT and MISTER CHRISTIAN. MISTER CHRISTIAN says something amusing and DOT laughs lightly.

TACKLETON

What's his story, then?

JOHN

His "story", you say?

TACKLETON

Yes, who is he? Your wife and that gentleman seem to be getting on.

JOHN

I found him during my rounds tonight out in the cold without a place to rest.

TACKLETON

What, eh - and you brought him here?!

JOHN

The Good Lord tells us to love our neighbors.

TACKLETON

Ah, well, the Good Lord doesn't live down here, does He? I'm sure Heaven has better neighbors for that sort of thing. Besides, you can always love from a distance. A good, sturdy nod "hello" never hurt anyone and is much safer to boot. I'd get rid of that man if I were you. Never know who people really are, even if you think you do - even your own spouse. Money is better than people, you see, for it is what it is... what it is.

JOHN

(Looking over again at DOT and MISTER CHRISTIAN.)  
Perhaps.

TACKLETON

Going back to the fickle man and woman of this world, I have a little proposal for you. Now Plekkenpoel - John - you know my man Caleb and his daughter Billie...

JOHN

Bella.

TACKLETON

Yes, that one - they are having a little supper with darling May and me on Thursday, a day before we are to wed. I would love it if you and your lovely young wife could join us.

JOHN

(Suspiciously.)  
That's very good of you.

TACKLETON

I know, but the pleasure is mine - or will be - I trust - as your company would be most invigorating and informative... for May, that is... giving her a chance to see such a pairing of

TACKLETON (CONT)

ages living so well and fully together. The sight would do her good, I know it.

JOHN

(Readying a rejection.)  
Truly, Mr. Tackleton...

TACKLETON

You'd love to come... excellent!

JOHN

Well, actually...

TACKLETON

It's at two sharp.

JOHN

Dot and I were going to go on an outing by ourselves.

TACKLETON

Wonderful - and now you won't be quite so lonely!

JOHN

It appears not.

TACKLETON

(Calling over to DOT.)  
Did you hear that, Mrs. Plekkenpoel? Darling May and I will be seeing you and your husband on Thursday!

DOT

Yes, Mr. Tackleton, I did indeed overhear that part. Only the low ceiling stops me from jumping for joy.

TACKLETON

Besides, it will be good for you, eh, John Plekkenpoel, going someplace for the fun of it rather than spending your time delivering a package here and there?

JOHN smiles stiffly.

TACKLETON

Ah, well, I must be off - important things to do, as always!

(To DOT.)

Goodbye, Mrs. Plekkenpoel.

(To JOHN.)

Goodbye, Mr. Plekkenpoel.

(To MISTER CHRISTIAN, forgetting the name.)

Goodbye... you.

(To ALL.)

Goodbye, everyone!

TACKLETON gives a grand smile, grabs the cake box, and exits out the front door. A pause descends, as JOHN and DOT look at EACH OTHER rather helplessly. JOHN is about to speak to DOT when the front door opens again and TACKLETON sticks HIS head in.

TACKLETON

Now, Plekkenpoel, just because I mentioned that bit about your being free from delivering this or that doesn't mean we wouldn't appreciate a little contribution to the menu on the special day itself, mind you...

JOHN is about to protest, when...

DOT

We, of course, would be happy to contribute.

TACKLETON

Ah, Mrs. Plekkenpoel, it would be wonderful if you'd whip something up for us.

DOT

Oh, yes, I would indeed love to whip something.

TACKLETON

Wonderful! Caleb and Bertha would be most pleased.

JOHN

Bella.

TACKLETON

Hm?

JOHN

She's Bella.

TACKLETON

(Raising HIS hands in an exaggerated, Italian gesture.)  
Indeed, she is! *Bella, bella!*

TACKLETON smiles again and closes the front door. Another brief pause descends. JOHN is about to speak to DOT, as before, when suddenly the front door opens and TACKLETON sticks HIS head in again.

TACKLETON

Come to think of it, no one has volunteered to make the ham yet, so we do need one of those... maybe two.



JOHN

Now look, Mr. Tackleton...

TACKLETON

You're right - two would be safer, to make sure all are fed... for to be well-fed is to be well-humored.

DOT

(Coyly.)

Would you like anything for dessert, too, Mr. Tackleton?

TACKLETON

Your good company is sweet enough, Mrs. Plekkenpoel!

TACKLETON grins inanely again and shuts the front door. JOHN turns anew to DOT - but then, presuming another last-minute entry by Tackleton, THEY turn to the front door expectantly and wait... and wait... until... Suddenly, JOHN and DOT jump in surprise. TACKLETON is waving at THEM through the kitchen windows.

TACKLETON

(Calling through the windows.)

Then again, a sweet would be lovely!

JOHN and DOT nod back, as TACKLETON grins again and disappears from view. DOT watches out the windows to make sure HE truly leaves this time. A moment later, we hear A CARRIAGE CLACKING OFF INTO THE DISTANCE.

DOT

The horse and his behind are leaving.

JOHN

I'm surprised you agreed to cook, let alone attend.

DOT

Silly John - I'm not doing it for that great oaf, but for poor May. Why, considering the proximity of the marriage day, the event will be more like a wake. Poor thing, she needs as much support as she can get.

JOHN

Tackleton wanted us to be there to... set a good example.

DOT

Set a good example?

JOHN

Aye - being apart in age, like them.

DOT

It is like him to think such an idea.

JOHN

(Sheepishly, perhaps truly wondering.)  
Do we, Dot... set a good example?

DOT

John Plekkenpoel, I won't even justify that with a comment.  
(To MISTER CHRISTIAN, indicating HIS barren plate.)  
Are you done, Mr. Christian?

MISTER CHRISTIAN nods. DOT smiles at HIM and takes the plate to the kitchen. JOHN notices this smile and clearly ponders TACKLETON's warning.

JOHN

Well, Mr. Christian, it is getting late and I suppose, wherever you are going, they are missing you there.

MISTER CHRISTIAN

Alas, Mr. Plekkenpoel, I have no place to go. I am, in fact, looking for someone - a friend, you might say - and was going to find myself an inn for the night before the storm hit. I confess finding such an inn would be rather difficult at this late hour. Now, your wife was telling me you have a spare room. Might you be willing to let me rest my head a few days here so I can get my bearings before moving on again?

JOHN

Stay... here?

MISTER CHRISTIAN

I would pay you, of course - at a rate you deem reasonable.

JOHN

Well, I... I'm afraid that...

DOT

One moment, Mr. Christian.

DOT moves JOHN off to the side.

JOHN

Now Dot...

DOT

Oh, John, be a Christian to a Christian!

JOHN

We don't know the man, Dot.

DOT

Goodness, John - he is quite elderly and clearly of no harm. Let him stay and find some peace here. Besides, we could use the extra money, especially around this time of the year - unless, that is, lightning strikes Mr. Tackleton and, in one great outpouring of humanity, he decides to disperse his fortune across town.

JOHN

I don't know, Dot.

DOT

Well, I do know, and I say let him stay.

JOHN looks at HER reluctantly, but DOT's stalwart gaze tells HIM there is no use arguing.

JOHN

You are welcome to stay, Mr. Christian.

MISTER CHRISTIAN

You are terribly kind, sir.

JOHN

Would thirty cents a night work?

MISTER CHRISTIAN

If the day is not extra, that is most generous.

DOT

(Extremely cheerful.)  
Good! So it's all settled!

MISTER CHRISTIAN

Splendid!

DOT

Splendid!

JOHN

(With distinctly less enthusiasm.)  
Splendid.

DOT

(To MISTER CHRISTIAN.)  
Now, Mr. Christian, you must be exhausted! Come and I'll show you to your room.

MISTER CHRISTIAN nods and rises. DOT leads him to the spare room door and

THEY enter the room. JOHN watches THEM a moment. HE then turns and looks at the BABY in the crib. HE smiles, as the BABY is evidently still dozing.

DOT

Still asleep, is he?

JOHN turns in surprise, not knowing DOT had re-entered.

JOHN

Aye, that he is.

DOT

I told you, John - as long as you're here, he sleeps.

JOHN

Perhaps I should be around a little more, then.

DOT

Mrs. Plekkenpoel and child would not object to it.

JOHN

Aye, I suppose I have been a bit focused on packages and letters - especially as of late. I just want us all to be safe and well-fed, in mouth and soul and everything in-between. We are a family now, after all - you and me and little Charlie there - and I must keep a good home for us. I know I don't say much, Dot, but you do know how much I love you, don't you? Ever since we met those four years ago during my rounds - you, such a pretty, lively thing, and me, such a plain, simple man - I thank God for all that He has given us. I wake every day blessed that you are in my life as you are.

DOT

And how is that, John?

JOHN

Why... as more than a friend.

DOT smiles slightly at this, though whether SHE is charmed or humored, we cannot tell. SHE picks the BABY up in HER arms.

DOT

Coming to bed, John?

JOHN

In a moment I will.

DOT

Goodnight then, Mr. Plekkenpoel.

JOHN  
Goodnight then, Mrs. Plekkenpoel.

DOT moves to exit with the BABY,  
when...

JOHN  
Dot?

DOT  
Yes, John?

JOHN  
Are you... happy?

DOT  
Am I happy?

JOHN  
Do I make you happy?

DOT  
Oh, silly John - that's another question I shan't dignify with a  
comment. You give me precious little to say today.

JOHN  
I mention it because Mr. Tackleton said we looked like quite a  
happy couple - what he would like to see for himself and May.

DOT  
Ah, well, I have no energy in me to care what Mr. Tackleton says  
about anything - and if I did, it would be most ill-spent.

JOHN  
(Disappointed HE at least hasn't received an affirmation.)  
Aye... that it would be.

DOT exits with the BABY into the master  
bedroom. JOHN looks after HER a moment  
in deep thought. HE goes to fetch HIS  
pipe and notices it is no longer lit.  
HE thinks another moment and, rather  
than relighting the pipe, HE sits down  
in a chair and ponders to HIMSELF, as  
the LIGHTS fall.

The MUSIC from the MUSIC BOX plays  
again, while the ACTORS and ACTRESSES  
re-emerge from the darkness, as at the  
beginning of the play. THEY proceed to  
rearrange the set. By turning this,  
moving that, bringing in a bit of the  
other, THEY turn the house of John and  
Dot Plekkenpoel into the workshop of

the toymakers "Gruff and Tackleton" - which also doubles as a home for CALEB and BELLA PLUMMER.

Before too long, the workshop stands before our eyes and the ACTORS and ACTRESSES exit the stage. The workshop itself is built against the walls of the toy shop, with precious little furniture and a general feeling of pennilessness about it. This feeling is counterbalanced by the large number of colorful toys plopped here, there, and everywhere, brought forth from the surrounding set into the room proper - including a fiddle in the corner.

In the middle of the set is a table - or really a workstation - at which sits a man of about 50, looking worn down by life, perhaps older than HIS years, but nevertheless still vibrant and determinedly joyful - CALEB PLUMMER. Next to HIM sits the girl we have met already - HIS daughter, the young and sunshiny BELLA. CALEB is painting the unpainted corners of a large wooden cricket. BELLA is sewing an eye on the face of a doll.

BELLA

Oh, Papa, I can't wait until you are done with the cricket.

CALEB

It will be the most wonderful toy in the shop, Bella - the brightest and the best!

BELLA

(With a smile and a laugh.)  
You say that about every toy, Papa.

CALEB

That's because it's true! The next thing is always the brightest and the best - and then replaced by something brighter and better - like life, Bella... joy heaped upon joy.

BELLA

Why, Papa, the way you work, you'd think you were making a present for a prince.

CALEB

That I am, my dear - for hundreds upon hundreds of little princes and princesses.

BELLA

Oh, Papa, that is why I love you so - and because I do love you so, you really must take better care of yourself.

CALEB

Better care?

BELLA

You were out last night in that terrible weather.

CALEB

Ah, Bella, I thought you were asleep the whole time.

BELLA

I was asleep - but this morning your coat had fallen off the rack and, when I put it back on the hook, I noticed how wet it was from last night's storm. You must be so careful. Mama died from pneumonia when least we expected it. I cannot lose you besides - not after her... and Edward. I know he is only in South America, but it has been so very long.

CALEB

I know, Bella - but he is well and safe.

BELLA

Besides, your coat - your beautiful blue coat - so finely tailored and so precious in memory. It was not at all made for the type of weather we had last night. You simply must be more careful, both of you and of it. Such a fine thing, too, given to you by the Duke of... of..... Oh, dear, I forget where... Which Duke was it who gave you the coat again?

CALEB

Why, it was... eh... eh...

CALEB looks off to the side of the stage at a coat hanging on the rack - but it is not the coat BELLA describes. It is dirty, gray, and worse for wear.

BELLA

It was the Duke of Argyle, I think - from Scotland?

CALEB

Ah, yes... Argyle!

BELLA

It was Argyle, wasn't it?

CALEB

I believe so.

BELLA

You believe?

CALEB

(A thankful distraction.)  
There - it is done!

CALEB has finished painting the cricket and displays it grandly. BELLA beams at the moment, forgetting all talk of coats and dukes.

BELLA

Oh, I so wish I could touch it.

CALEB

In about an hour, the paint will be dry.

BELLA

Please, Papa - describe the cricket to me.

CALEB

Why, it is about three hands in length and one hand in height... bright green, like a new, fresh leaf just budding from the vine... shiny black eyes, like sparkly coal... splashes of yellow on the legs, as if it stepped in the sun on its way to the field... and let's see... its wings, slightly outward, dabbled in purples and pinks like rainbows!

We can't help but notice the cricket doesn't look anything like what HE has described. In fact, it is quite dull-looking.

BELLA

Oh, Papa - how well you describe him... and such an imagination!

CALEB

(Shyly.)  
Aye, I do have that.

BELLA

He is just as I hoped him to be.

CALEB

You gave me a perfect description.

BELLA

Please - I cannot help myself.

BELLA slowly and carefully reaches out HER hands to feel around the edges of the cricket so as not to get HER fingers too much in the paint. It is here we see SHE is blind. CALEB watches HER for a moment as HER fingers traverse the cricket.



BELLA

I so wish I could see him, Papa.

CALEB

As you can, with your hands as your eyes.

BELLA

No, I mean the cricket himself - the one I hear.

CALEB

Why, Bella, even I have never seen nor heard him.

BELLA

I know - and such a silly thing to think of, when I have heard him a few times now.

CALEB

You say "he," when it could be a "her."

BELLA

Oh, no - he is far too shy to be a "her," never coming out and only occasionally being known. I imagine, if he were a her, we would be good friends and chatting all the time. I have only just barely heard him - and yet only me, as you say - as if he were only chirping at me. He's there, but unseen - like God in his way - talking just to me. Why, it must be... it must be five years now... around the time Mama died. I started hearing him again and it has never stopped. I heard him even yesterday when I was thinking of her... and... and Edward.

CALEB

(Concerned - not quite believing HER.)  
Well... maybe one day I shall hear him.

BELLA

Yes, but you really must listen for him.

CALEB

I will try, Bella.

BELLA smiles again and feels the cricket. CALEB watches HER sadly, doubting, somewhere in HIS mind, if HER mental state is perhaps all it should be. HE decides to break the moment and turn it back to better cheer.

CALEB

As I look at it, I must say that cricket really is quite a thing! It is not only the best and the brightest now, but for all time, I'm sure of it! I tell you, there is not a little prince or princess in this world who wouldn't love to have this little man here as their pet... and why not? Jumping carefreely

CALEB (CONT)

through the grass - bathing in the golden sun - not a care or concern in the world. Why, in its own way, the cricket lives the life of a child itself. What a wonderful lesson for us all and a wonderful way to be alive.

CALEB takes the cricket and puts it carefully aside.

CALEN

Now, enough of this, as work has taken up far too many hours today, leaving us little time to celebrate.

BELLA

Celebrate what?

CALEB

Why, living itself - which is always so worthy!

CALEB runs to the corner of the room with the energy of a child and grabs the fiddle. HE turns and begins to play A DELIGHTFUL, PEPPY FOLK TUNE. BELLA claps along delightedly.

BELLA

Oh, Papa, you do play so well!

Suddenly, the door of the workshop flies open and hits the back wall - BANG! A grim-looking TACKLETON stands in the doorframe. CALEB stops HIS fiddle-playing with dread.

TACKLETON

May I come in?

CALEB

Of course, sir.

TACKLETON

Thank ye.

BELLA

Good afternoon, Mr. Tackleton.

TACKLETON

Good afternoon, Betsy... Caleb.

CALEB

I hope your day has been a good one, sir.

TACKLETON

(Acidly surveying the scene.)

I'll answer that after I count the number of toys you've made at the end of it. I was just passing by and I heard more noise being made than anything else.

CALEB

(Aside, to BELLA.)

Oh, how he jokes so, Bella!

BELLA laughs delightedly.

BELLA

Do you like music, Mr. Tackleton?

TACKLETON

I like a good dirge as much as the next man.

CALEB

I was just taking a little breather, Mr. Tackleton.

BELLA

Oh, yes - Papa made this wonderful cricket!

BELLA proudly displays the cricket.

TACKLETON

(None too impressed.)

A cricket, eh?

CALEB

(Perhaps this will help.)

A magic cricket.

TACKLETON

What makes him magic, then - the fact that he will sell at all?

BELLA

Why, just look at those bright colors - the greens, the yellows, the purples, the pinks!

TACKLETON glares at CALEB, seeing no such colors.

CALEB

(Aside, to TACKLETON.)

The paint is running low, sir.

TACKLETON

(Aside, to CALEB.)

As well it should, if you intend on making things like this.

BELLA

Why, Papa and I believe it is the best and brightest toy yet!

TACKLETON

Aye - though rather hard to imagine a child cuddling that at night, unless they want nightmares or a nasty rash in the side.

CALEB

It only matters if it makes children happy.

TACKLETON

It only matters if it sells.

BELLA laughs delightedly.

BELLA

Oh, Mr. Tackleton, if one didn't know you better, he'd think you cared about no one in the world at all.

TACKLETON

Aye, there are few on Earth who love their fellow man as much as I do - else there would be no one to buy my toys.

BELLA laughs again, as if TACKLETON were making a joke. TACKLETON gestures to CALEB - "let's talk privately."

CALEB

(To BELLA.)

One moment, Bella.

CALEB rises and goes with TACKLETON upstage. THEY speak *sotto voce* so BELLA won't hear.

TACKLETON

Look here, Caleb - sales are down.

CALEB

I know they are, Mr. Tackleton - but soon...

TACKLETON

Soon isn't soon enough! I have bills to pay in the meantime and, from you, all I get are ugly toys that gather ugly dust on ugly shelves - like this cricket here. No one cuddles a cricket at night, unless they're another cricket - and we don't get many of them coming 'round with money to spend. Remember that you live here, adjacent to my shop - for a very modest rent, mind you - courtesy of my generosity. If sales don't improve by the new year, I will be forced to rent out this space to the load of cobblers down the street, who have offered quite a fine price for it. Then you and your Bertha will have to find another space for carving your ugly little crickets - or whatever other insects you will turn to next.

(Peering at HIM intently.)

I trust you understand me, Caleb?

CALEB

Of course, Mr. Tackleton - and I won't let you down.

TACKLETON

For that, at least, I thank you.

BELLA

And I thank you, Mr. Tackleton.

TACKLETON

(Turning suddenly - has SHE heard?)  
Thank me?

BELLA

For the rosebush you gave me!

TACKLETON

(Confounded.)  
The rosebush?

BELLA

Why, yes - the rosebush - the one you sent to us last week!

CALEB noticeably cringes. BELLA gestures off towards a corner of the room. There is a small rosebush there in a pot. TACKLETON looks at the bush and then stares back at CALEB quizzically. CALEB gestures HIM to be silent and play along.

BELLA

It is so funny, too, because, just a few days before, Papa and I passed by a shop with a wonderful rosebush and I told him "Oh, Papa, I so wish we could have one!" I thought it would add such cheer to the place and to me, as well - something to grow and something to care for - and something so beautiful, as even my fingers can tell. Oh, but I knew we couldn't afford it and so I made Papa promise he wouldn't buy it for me... and then there it was! A few days later, I found the rosebush here in our house and Papa said you had bought it for me. You really are such a kind, generous, thoughtful man.

TACKLETON

(To BELLA, but looking at CALEB.)  
Yes, well... I just can't help myself.

BELLA

Oh, yes - you can't help many, many things.

TACKLETON

While I would love to stand around all day and talk about my delightful generosity, I did want you both to know that we will have some visitors for our supper tomorrow. John Plekkenpoel and

TACKLETON (CONT)

his wife Dot will be joining us. They begged and pleaded to be allowed to attend, you see, and well, I simply couldn't tell them "no." I can only blame the human feeling that shines like a beacon in my heart. They will be bringing the sweets and the ham - two of 'em. I trust you two can handle the rest. I will have May fetched by coach from her room at the inn and we shall have a good time of it indeed.

BELLA

I cannot wait, Mr. Tackleton! How lucky May is to marry you.

TACKLETON

Yes, I know! Anyway, I must be off, so you can make more toys.

CALEB

Good day, Mr. Tackleton.

TACKLETON

Good day, Caleb... Betty.

TACKLETON glares again at the cricket and shakes HIS head disapprovingly at CALEB. HE brusquely exits and closes the door behind HIM.

BELLA

I sense Mr. Tackleton sounded a little different today - perhaps nervous about the wedding.

CALEB

(HIS mind elsewhere.)

Aye, perhaps.

BELLA

I know they are much apart in age, but it will be good for May, after her parents died and her being so alone.

CALEB

(Ditto.)

Aye.

BELLA

It's just... I only hope Edward is not too hurt by it.

CALEB

Edward?

BELLA

Yes, for he did love May so - and even though he's been away for so long, they say love never dies. I have never experienced it so myself, but my heart says it must be true. One day Edward will return and he might be so very hurt when he learns that May has married Mr. Tackleton.

CALEB

Ah, well, when Edward does return, I trust all will be well and he will understand. Why, he may himself have found a blushing bride someplace in the tropics.

BELLA

(Vehemently.)

Oh, no, no, no... no!

CALEB

(Surprised by this vehemence.)

No?

BELLA

No.

CALEB

But as you said, with being away so long...

BELLA

Edward loved May too much to marry another.

CALEB

Aye, Bella, but...

BELLA

I know my brother, father.

CALEB

(No use arguing.)

I know you do, my dear.

BELLA

I know Edward would never marry someone other than May, though I don't know why he has been gone these few years.

(Suddenly - is this a question or a test?)

Do you think something has happened to him?

CALEB

(Like BELLA before - far too insistently.)

Oh, no, no, no... no!

BELLA

No?

CALEB

No.

BELLA

When did you last hear from him again?

CALEB

(Vaguely.)

Oh, it was... let's see... two months ago.

BELLA

Two whole months - and where was he then?

CALEB

(Ditto.)

Why, he was in... in... Peru, I believe.

BELLA

Peru! Oh, how very exciting!

CALEB

(Groping for countries.)

Aye, and then he was off to, eh... Argentina.

BELLA

Oh, my, it must be so fascinating traveling the world! I remember I was so scared when you hadn't heard from Edward last year and it seemed something terrible had happened to him. I was in such despair - especially after we lost Mama. I couldn't have survived losing dear Edward, as well. At that point, I would have just wanted to wrap myself in the darkness I see and never come out again... and then, as if by magic, you received a letter from Edward! Since then, I have been filled with such heart for him and such hope. I can't wait for him one day to come walking through the door.

CALEB

(We don't believe this for a second.)

Aye - as I'm sure he shall.

BELLA

Well, now, Papa, if you allow me, I should like to go for a lie down... my hands are so tired.

CALEB

Of course, Bella - you go and I will finish the doll.

BELLA

Thank you, Papa - I do appreciate it and love you so.

BELLA kisses CALEB, rises, and walks into a nearby room. CALEB looks after HER to make sure SHE is well gone and then exhales a life's worth of care. HE buries HIS head in HIS hands in evident pain. Slowly, HE looks heavenwards and talks to Edward.

CALEB

God forgive me, Edward - whatever have I done? I know you can hear me, and I hope you understand why I do what I do, because even I sometimes do not. Oh, what a mess life has made for us, and what a mess I have made of the mess.